

Scrutiny Committee

Meeting to be held on Friday, 22 July 2016

Electoral Division affected:
(All Divisions);

Highways Performance

Contact for further information:

Christine Entwistle, Tel: 01772 535205, Senior District Lead Officer

christine.entwistle@lancashire.gov.uk

Executive Summary

This report serves to update the committee on the current communication arrangements in place to support Members with their highways casework and service performance of the same.

A verbal report will be presented regarding highway works and delivery schedules

Recommendation

The Committee is asked to note and comment on the report

Background and Advice

1. Background

This report is presented to the Overview and Scrutiny committee in response to the committees request for an update on service response times to Member enquiries.

The report will provide an overview of the current resources, communication arrangements and performance levels.

2. Resources

In 2010 Highways employed 12 Public Realm Managers and 12 District Lead Officers, one significant aspect of their collective role was to manage all political stakeholder enquiries, most notably the enquiries and highway casework of county council Members in conjunction with teams of engineers and technical staff conducting investigations of Members requests and supported by budget streams (revenue and "Members Pot") providing a degree of flexibility to those managers in delivering the aspirations of Members.

Since 2010 the Highways Service as part of its contribution in achieving the sizeable budget savings the county council has had to make, has to date lost 110 posts from the Public Realm and Business Support teams, these are the people that would have historically dealt with Member enquiries.

By 2014 Public Realm Managers had reduced to four and District Lead Officers reduced to five and as stated above significant reductions of technical staff who supported them in carrying out their role with remaining staff overwhelmed with the volume of workload, and performance levels which are detailed later in this report, suffered accordingly.

3. Highways Service Offer

In February 2015 the Highways Service Offer was presented to Full Council which detailed the changes the service had to be made in light of reduced resources. The service offer clearly outlined how Highways needed to adapt and prioritise to be able to deliver and maintain the best service it could to our communities.

Material changes included:

- De-establish the Public Realm Manager role.
- Remove designated contacts and adopt a team based approach to prevent individual officers being over burdened with unacceptable high levels of enquiries and work.
- Extended response times to 20 working days.

The Service Offer cited that "The reduction in management capacity within the highway service and a reduced ability to engage specifically with elected members on specific issues mean that many more queries will have to be reported using the Customer service centre with updates to queries being accessed through those same channels. The highway service will be unable to support regular 1 to 1 meetings with Members. There will be less forward looking liaison with district and parish councils and the contact will become much more transactional."

The Highways Service Offer was approved by Full Council in February 2015.

4. Member Feedback

Following Member feedback in August 2015 and service recognition that Members need to have a direct link to Highways, and whilst appreciating that due to the reduction in staffing levels we must continue to operate with a team based approach to working to ensure that no individual officer has undue and unacceptable levels of workload, it was agreed to provide a heightened service to county council Members.

In September 2015 Highways Direct was launched and managed by the highway service district lead officer team which was bolstered by an additional officer reassigned from another team in highways.

County Council Members have a direct telephone number to their district lead officer for urgent queries; a dedicated email address highwaysdirect@lancashire.gov.uk the use of which ensures that we prioritise Members highway casework and provide an

improved service response time of 15 working days as opposed to 20 working days to other stakeholders.

5. Performance

It is accepted that in 2010 and in the subsequent years when there were 12 public realm managers and 12 district lead officers coupled with many more technical staff who all could be contacted direct, that it was perceived that Members received a better service.

In addition to the number of staff resource these officers had access to budget streams which also provided greater flexibility in providing solutions to issues Members raised which again enhanced that perception of a better service.

In 2014 and in preparation of writing the Highways Service Office, detailed research and analysis of our actual performance was carried out. It was evident and unsurprising that with a reduction of 15 key officers (a loss of 8 Public Realm Managers and 7 District Lead Officers) as well as a loss of many technical staff that it was not feasible for staff and despite their best efforts to provide the same level of service as in 2010.

Instead it was evident that we provided a very chaotic and disjointed service, with many examples and an increased high risk of member enquiries being lost or not actioned, despite personally speaking with officers. This was due to the high workloads of individual staff members who were overwhelmed by the volume of Member issues and the service could not effectively control this individual volume due to the direct contact systems in place.

It is without question that there were pockets of excellence and some Members did receive a very high level of service, but this was not consistent throughout the county and we had significant number of cases of service failure.

In 2014/15 we responded to Member enquiries within 15 working days in just 47% of cases with the average length of time 17 working days. Data below:

Year	Total No VIP Enquiries	Of which from CC Members	% of CC Members responded within Target Response time*	Average Number of Working Days to respond
2014/15	5809	1,569	47%	17
2015/16	9041	3,291	93%	9

*Q1 of 15/16, 20 working days - Q2, Q3, &Q4 of 15/16, 15 working days

6. Conclusion

It is often said that perception is more powerful than the truth and there is a mixture of both in respect to Highways providing an effective service in managing Members highway casework.

It is true that in 2010 and the immediate years following that we could support and many Members enjoyed a very personal and high level service, with direct communication with named officers as we had the staffing levels to support that relationship and also budget streams to deliver a more tailored service.

However by 2014 with such a significant reduction in staff as well as changes in budgets we were no longer able and despite individual officers best efforts provide a consistently good or effective service.

Like most services very difficult proposals and recommendations had to be sent to Members to deliberate and decide on. 12 Public Realm Managers financially cost the county council just over £720,000 each year and following analysis of their role and notwithstanding the added value they provided to Members, at a time when we had to consider reducing the actual services we provide the people of Lancashire, we could not justify that expenditure and instead recommended that we maximised our funding in delivering essential highway services on the ground to benefit our communities.

Since the implementation of Highways Direct in September 2015 the service has performed at consistently high levels and received many compliments from county council Members in the level of service provided.

Despite the worst winter in living memory in which staff have been overwhelmed by the volume of enquiries and work loads and which is partially responsible for the 56% increase in enquiries received in 15/16, staff have worked to outstanding levels to maintain an overall high performance, although it must be noted that there have been difficulties in achieving response timeframes in Q4 of 2015/16 and Q1 of 2016/17 as we are still working through the huge amount of work the persistent and heavy rainfall and flooding created and performance levels in responding to Members enquiries within 15 working days has dipped to 84%.

Whilst that is acknowledged, we continue to work hard to provide the best service we can to Members with the resources we have and although 15 working days is our service response time to Member enquiries, we do respond as quickly as we possibly can, reacting to urgent requests appropriately and which is evidenced by our overall average response time of 9 working days.

Consultations

n/a

Implications:

This item has the following implications, as indicated:

Risk management

There are no risk implications within this report

Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985

List of Background Papers

Paper	Date	Contact/Tel
n/a	n/a	n/a

Reason for inclusion in Part II, if appropriate